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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship of adolescents' self-esteem (SE) to the familial variables of parental permissiveness, authoritarianism, and authoritativeness and to the cognitive variables of high standards, self-criticism, and overgeneralization. Participants (N=99) were college students from a coeducational, beral arts university. Participants completed a mothers' authority questionnaire; a fathers' authority questionnaire; the Attitudes Toward Self Scale; a self-esteem questionnaire; and a demographic information sheet. Consistent with previous findings, both Mother's and Father's Authoritarianism were inversely related to SE whereas Mother's and Father's Authoritativeness were directly related to SE. However, hierarchical regression analyses revealed that these effects of parental authority were strongly overshadowed by the cognitive variable of Overgeneralization. The tendency to overgeneralize from failure in a specific situation to a general sense of failure was associated with 33.6% of the variance in SE; the authority variables accounted for an additional 12.2% of the SE variance. One implication of these findings is the suggestion that investigations of SE development include more than one domain of potential influence. A related practical implication of these findings is a suggestion that those programs which are designed to assist adults in their role as parents should continue to instruct these individuals in appropriate uses of authority. (ABL)

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Cognitive Overgeneralization, Parental Authority, and Self-Esteem

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Abstract

The relationship of adolescents' self-esteem (SE) to the familial variables of parental Permissiveness, Authoritarianism, and Authoritativeness and to the cognitive variables of High Standards, Self-Criticism, and Overgeneralization were investigated. Consistent with previous findings, both Mother's and Father's Authoritarianism were inversely related to SE whereas Mother's and Father's Authoritativeness were directly related to SE. However, hierarchical regression analyses revealed that these effects of parental authority were strongly overshadowed by the cognitive variable of Overgeneralization. The tendency to overgeneralize from failure in a specific situation to a general sense of failure was associated with 33.6% of the variance in SE; the authority variables accounted for an additional 12.2% of the SE variance.

The relationship of parental authority to adolescent self-esteem (SE) has been frequently investigated, but not with consistent results. Sears (1970), Bachman (1982), and Kawash, Kerr, and Clewes (1984) reported that strict parental disciplinary practices were inversely related to adolescents' SE. Gecas (1971) and Gecas and Schwalbe (1986), however, found that parental authority was largely unrelated to adolescents' SE. Furthermore, Coopersmith (1967) and Peterson, Southworth, and Peters (1983) reported a positive relationship between SE and disciplinary practices that were firm, principled, and demanding. The results reported by Buri, Louiselle, Misukanis, and Mueller (1988) and Buri (1989) helped to dispel much of the confusion in this area of study. Using Baumrind's (1971) three prototypes of parental authority (i.e., permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative), these researchers found a strong inverse relationship between parental authoritarianism and adolescents' SE, a strong positive relationship between authoritativeness and SE, and no relationship between permissiveness and SE.

An approach to the study of SE that is distinctively different from that described above is the investigation of cognitive factors related to SE. It has been posited by several cognitive therapists (e.g., Beck, 1979; Ellis & Harper, 1975; McKay, Davis, & Fanning, 1981; McKay & Fanning, 1987) that distorted thought patterns both cause and perpetuate low SE. Three specific cognitive patterns that have been implicated in therapeutic settings are of interest here: (a) Are people who set high standards for themselves more prone to low SE because of the difficulty of living up to such standards? (b) Do individuals who are more self-critical experience lower SE? and (c) Is low SE more common among those individuals who overgeneralize from failure in

a specific circumstance to a general sense of failure?

In the present study, assessments of parental Permissiveness, Authoritarianism, and Authoritativeness were made using Buri's (1991) Parental Authority Questionnaire; measures of participants' High Standards, Self-Criticism, and Overgeneralization were obtained using Carver and Ganellen's (1983) Attitudes Toward Self Scale; and subjects' SE scores were derived from responses to Fitts' (1965) Tennessee Self-Concept Scale. The following exploratory questions were of interest: To what extent do the parental authority factors and the cognitive variables predict non-overlapping proportions of the variance in adolescents' SE? In other words, is the effect of parental authority upon SE mediated by cognitive distortions (or vice versa)? Or do these two sets of factors account for distinct proportions of variance in SE?

Method

Participants

The participants were 145 college students from a coeducational, liberal arts university in the northern Midwest who agreed to participate in the study as part of an introductory psychology course requirement. The responses of 39 students were not included in the present analyses either because one of their parents had died or because their parents were divorced or separated. The responses of an additional seven students were eliminated from the analyses because their response forms were inadequately completed. The remaining 50 women and 49 men (mean age = 19.3 years) completed several questionnaires.

Materials and Procedure

Each participant was asked to complete five questionnaires that were presented in randomized order: (a) a mothers' authority questionnaire, (b) a fathers' authority questionnaire, (c) the Attitudes Toward Self Scale, (d) a SE scale, and (e) a demographic information sheet.

Each of the research participants was told that we were investigating factors that are believed to influence SE in adolescents. They were instructed that there were no right or wrong answers and that all of their responses were anonymous; therefore they were encouraged to respond to each item as honestly as possible. They were also instructed not to spend too much time on any one item since we were interested in their first reaction to each statement. They were also reminded of the importance of responding to every item on the questionnaires.

Parental authority. Distinctions proposed by Baumrind (1971) for three prototypes of parental authority (i.e., permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative) were employed by Buri (1991) to construct the Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ). The PAQ consists of 10 permissive, 10 authoritarian, and 10 authoritative Likert-type items stated from the point of view of an individual appraising the authority exercised by his or her mother or father. Buri (1991) reported the following test-retest reliabilities (N = 61 over a two-week interval) and Cronbach alpha values (N = 185), respectively: .81 and .75 for Mothers' Permissiveness; .86 and .85 for Mothers' Authoritarianism; .78 and .82 for Mothers' Authoritativeness; .77 and .74 for Fathers' Permissiveness; .85 and .87 for Fathers' Authoritarianism; and .92 and .85 for Fathers' Authoritativeness.

Each participant completed two forms of the PAQ, one to evaluate the authority exercised by the mother and one to evaluate the authority of the father. Examples of items from the permissive scale are: "My mother/father has always felt that what children need is to be free to make up their own minds and to do what they want to do, even if this does not agree with what their parents might want," and "As I was growing up my mother/father allowed me to decide most things for myself without a lot of direction from her/him." Examples of items from the authoritarianism scale are: "As I was growing up my mother/father did not allow me to question any decision that she/he had made," and "My mother/father has always felt that more force should be used by parents in order to get their children to behave the way the are supposed to." Examples from the authoritative scale are: "My mother/father has always encouraged verbal give-and-take whenever I have felt that family rules and restrictions were unreasonable," and "My mother/father had clear standards of behavior for the children in our home as I was growing up, but she/he was willing to adjust those standards to the needs of each of the individual children in the family."

Attitudes Toward Self Scale. Carver and Ganellen (1983) presented the Attitudes Toward Self Scale (ATS). The ATS consists of 18 self-descriptive items to which participants are asked to respond on a 7-point scale ranging from *extremely untrue* of me (1) to *extremely true* of me (7). The ATS was constructed to measure individuals' tendencies to hold high expectations for themselves (High Standards), make harsh judgments of themselves (Self-Criticism), and overgeneralize their negative self-judgments (Overgeneralization). Carver, Ganellen, and Behar-Mitrani (1985) reported test-retest

reliabilities (N = 93) over a six-week interval of .67 for High Standards, .44 for Self-Criticism, and .65 for Overgeneralization.

Sample High Standards items are: "It would be hard for anyone to do as well as I want myself to do," and "I am a perfectionist in setting my goals." The Self-Criticism factor is measured by items such as the following: "When I don't do as well as I hoped to, I often get upset at myself," and "When my behavior doesn't live up to my standards, I feel I have let myself or someone else down." The following sample items are from the Overgeneralization subscale: "How I feel about myself overall is easily influenced by a single mistake," and "Noticing one fault of mine makes me think more and more about other faults."

Global self-esteem. Each participant also completed the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (TSCS; Fitts, 1965), which consists of 100 self-descriptive statements to which subjects responded on a 5-point scale ranging from *completely false* of me (1) to *completely true* of me (5). The TSCS is a widely-used research tool for SE studies (Marsh & Richards, 1988; Mitchell, 1985; Roid & Fitts, 1988). The Total Positive SE Score was derived for each participant in the present study. As operationalized by Fitts,

> persons with high scores tend to like themselves, feel that they are persons of value and worth, have confidence in themselves, and act accordingly. People with low scores are doubtful about their own worth; see themselves as undesirable;...and have little faith or confidence in themselves (p. 2).

Fitts (1965) reported a test-retest reliability for the Total Positive SE Score of .92. An internal consistency estimate of .92 for this Total

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Score was reported by Stanwyck and Garrison (1982). Also, Roid and Fitts (1988) reported a coefficient alpha value of .94 for this Total Score scale.

Demographic information. The participants also provided information concerning (a) their gender, (b) their age, (c) whether one of their parents had died, and (d) whether their parents were divorced or separated.

Results

The intercorrelations among the variables investigated in the present study are presented in Table 1. Consistent with the findings reported by Buri et al. (1988) and Buri (1989), the following parental variables were significantly related to SE: Mother's Authoritarianism ($r = -.28$, $p < .01$), Mother's Authoritativeness ($r = .39$, $p < .001$), Father's Authoritarianism ($r = -.20$, $p < .05$), and Father's Authoritativeness ($r = .35$, $p < .001$). Of the three cognitive factors, Self-Criticism ($r = -.20$, $p < .05$) and Overgeneralization ($r = -.58$, $p < .001$) were significantly correlated with SE.

Hierarchical regressions of SE on the authority and the cognitive variables were completed. The hierarchical models yield F values, probability levels, and r^2s for each independent variable while controlling for the variance associated with previously entered variables. In the initial hierarchical regressions, the authority variables were entered first (in order of the strength of the bivariate correlations found in Table 1), followed by the statistically significant cognitive factors. A summary of these hierarchical regression analyses is reported in Table 2. Together, the authority and the cognitive variables accounted for 47.7% ($p < .0001$) of the variance in SE. The authority variables alone were associated with 21.7% of the variance in SE; the cognitive factors accounted for an additional 26% of the variance.

Table 1

Intercorrelations of SE, the Parental Authority Factors, and the Cognitive Factors

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. SE	1.00								
2. PER-M	.19								
3. TAR-M	-.28**	-.67***							
4. TAT-M	.39***	.26**	-.43***						
5. PER-F	.13	.56***	-.33***	.12					
6. TAR-F	-.20*	-.25*	.40***	-.16	-.61***				
7. TAT-F	.35***	.06	-.16	.38***	.24*	-.58***			
8. HI STAN	.04	-.12	.13	-.01	-.13	.02	-.01		
9. SELF-CRIT	-.20*	-.14	.23*	-.04	-.09	.07	.00	.64***	
10. OVER	-.58***	-.12	.20*	-.21*	-.06	.05	.08	.27**	.54***

Note. SE = Self-Esteem; PER-M = Mother's Permissiveness; TAR-M = Mother's Authoritarianism; TAT-M = Mother's Authoritativeness; PER-F = Father's Permissiveness; TAR-F = Father's Authoritarianism; TAT-F = Father's Authoritativeness; HI STAN = High Standards; SELF-CRIT = Self-Criticism; OVER = Overgeneralization.

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$

Table 2

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses When the Authority Variables Were Entered Prior to the Cognitive Variables

	Dependent Variable		
	Self-Esteem		
Independent Variables	*F(1,92)*	*p*	$R^2\Delta$
TAT-M	26.05	<.0001	.148
TAT-F	8.56	<.01	.049
TAR-M	2.99	*ns*	.017
TAR-F	0.48	*ns*	.003
OVER	43.17	<.0001	.246
SELF-CRIT	2.50	*ns*	.014

Note. TAT-M = Mother's Authoritativeness; TAT-F = Father's Authoritativeness; TAR-M = Mother's Authoritarianism; TAR-F = Father's Authoritarianism; OVER = Overgeneralization; SELF-CRIT = Self-Criticism.

The order of entry of the independent variables into the hierarchical regression equation was then reversed; in other words, the cognitive factors were entered into the equation prior to the authority variables. A summary of these analyses is presented in Table 3. The two cognitive factors of Overgeneralization and Self-Criticism accounted for 35.5% of the variance in SE, and the authority variables were associated with an additional 12.2% of the variance.

Table 3

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses When the Cognitive Variables Were Entered Prior to the Authority Variables

	Dependent Variable		
	Self-Esteem		
Independent Variables	*F(1,92)*	*p*	$R^2\Delta$
OVER	59.09	<.0001	.336
SELF-CRIT	3.37	*ns*	.019
TAT-M	11.97	<.001	.068
TAT-F	8.37	<.01	.048
TAR-M	0.85	*ns*	.005
TAR-F	0.10	*ns*	.001

Note. OVER = Overgeneralization; SELF-CRIT = Self-Criticism; TAT-M = Mother's Authoritativeness; TAT-F = Father's Authoritativeness; TAR-M = Mother's Authoritarianism; TAR-F = Father's Authoritarianism.

Discussion

One striking finding in the present study is the magnitude of the relationship between Overgeneralization and SE, especially relative to the relationships of the other cognitive variables (High Standards and Self-Criticism) to SE. Ever since James' (1890) seminal suggestions that SE is strongly affected by the extent to which individuals' accomplishments match their aspirations, psychologists have stressed the importance of setting personal

standards that are not excessively high. Since the inevitable outcome of establishing high personal expectations for performance is the experience of failure (at least for most individuals), it has been repeatedly emphasized that to avoid such failure (and the concomitant self-denigration), individuals should be encouraged to adopt standards of performance that will reduce the disparities between personal aspirations and personal accomplishments. However, the present findings suggest that neither maintaining High Standards for one's personal performance nor Self-Criticism are strongly predictive of SE. Instead, the tendency to Overgeneralize from failure in a specific domain to a more general sense of personal failure appears to have far more significant implications for SE. These present results, which are consistent with investigations of the relationships of the ATS measures to depression (e.g., Carver et al., 1985; Carver, LaVoie, Kuhl, & Ganellen, 1988; Ganellen, 1988), suggest that Overgeneralization may be an important cognitive dimension for clinical contexts. In fact, therapeutic interventions that are aimed at the restructuring of cognitive Overgeneralization may be more effective than those which attempt to counter High Standards or Self-Criticism. This may well provide an important focus for future research within clinical settings.

The strong relationship between Overgeneralization and SE in the present study may also help to explain why those who struggle with low SE often adopt one of the following two "coping strategies." For some individuals who have feelings of incompetence and inadequacy, the tendency is to restrict the time and energy which they expend when working on projects. Although typically unaware of it, the cognitive ruminations may follow along this sort of

tact: "If I do not accomplish my goal, but I haven't really given 100%, then I haven't really failed." Thus the anxiety that might result from the Overgeneralization of failure in a specific situation to a more general sense of personal failure may be avoided. For other low SE individuals, however, the "strategy" seems to be quite different. Rather than attempting to avoid the anxiety of personal failure through reduced effort, these individuals overachieve. They seem to be driven not to fail in specific circumstances, thus avoiding the denigrating personal consequences of Overgeneralization. While admittedly speculative, these suggestions offer a reasonable explication of the mediating influence of Overgeneralization in SE.

Another important finding in the present study derives from the relative affects of familial factors vs. cognitive factors upon SE. While the variables of parental Authoritarianism and Authoritativeness were robustly predictive of SE, the effects of these familial variables were overshadowed by the cognitive factor of Overgeneralization. For example, Overgeneralization alone accounted for nearly 34% of the variance in SE; furthermore, Overgeneralization was associated with 24.6% of the SE variance after the Authoritarianism and Authoritative variables had been entered into the regression equation.

One implication of these findings is the suggestion that investigations of SE development include more than one domain of potential influence --- for example in the present study, the use of both *familial* factors and *cognitive* factors. Whereas the Authoritarianism and Authoritativeness variables accounted for nearly 22% of the variance in SE when the cognitive factors were not taken into consideration, once Overgeneralization was considered,

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the authority variables were associated with only 12% of the variance. Thus including the cognitive domain in the present study served to temper a potential overemphasis upon the role of parental authority in SE development.

A related practical implication of these findings is a suggestion that those programs which are designed to assist adults in their role as parents should continue to instruct these individuals in appropriate uses of authority. As can be seen in Table 3, once Overgeneralization and Self-Criticism had been entered into the hierarchical regression model, the authority varibles still accounted for 12.2 % of the SE variance. However, the role of parental authority in SE development should not be emphasized to the exclusion of an understanding of the role that cognitive factors (such as Overgeneralization) play in the derivation of SE.

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